

THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM OF A MID-ELEVENTH CENTURY MONUMENT

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Fig. 1 Goddess Dharmameghabhumi (Dharma Cloud Stage); Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India; ca. 1040; mineral colors on clay; height approx. 9 7/8 in. (25 cm); photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984

GODDESS DHARMAMEGHABHUMI IN THE TABO MAIN TEMPLE

Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India

ca. 1040

SUMMARY

Tabo Monastery may be the earliest completely preserved Tibetan Buddhist monument. Founded during the resurgence of Buddhist culture in 996 by the western Tibetan King Yeshe Wo and renovated in 1042, the temple iconography reflects the tension between the more conservative form of monastic Buddhism and the then radical new Highest Yogatantras, in which male and female deities embrace. Art historian Christian Luczanits explores the narratives and overlapping mandalas of this intricate shrine and how they lead from the nature of reality, to Buddhist practice, and finally to enlightenment itself.

Arguably, the main temple of Tabo Monastery in the Spiti Valley of Himachal Pradesh, India, is the earliest Tibetan Buddhist monument preserved in its entirety, as its content fully reflects its renovation finished in 1042 CE. We know from its identifying captions and inscriptions that Tabo was founded forty-six years earlier under the auspices of King Yeshe Wo, while its renovation was commissioned by his grandnephew Jangchub Wo. Both are portrayed in the temple's murals, Yeshe Wo flanked by his sons on the south wall of the entry hall, and Jangchub Wo at the access to the ambulatory above the renovation inscription, which provides the crucial twelve-year cycle date.¹ Given that both represent the ruling elite of the Purang-Guge Kingdom established at that time in western Tibet, the structure can be called a state temple. Its construction and refurbishment align with major state support of a conservative form of monastic Buddhism in the western Himalayan area, the ambivalence of which is demonstrated here by the goddess Dharmameghabhumi (Dharma Cloud Stage) painted between the main sculptures on the south wall of the main temple's assembly hall (fig. 1).

CONTESTED FORMS OF BUDDHISM

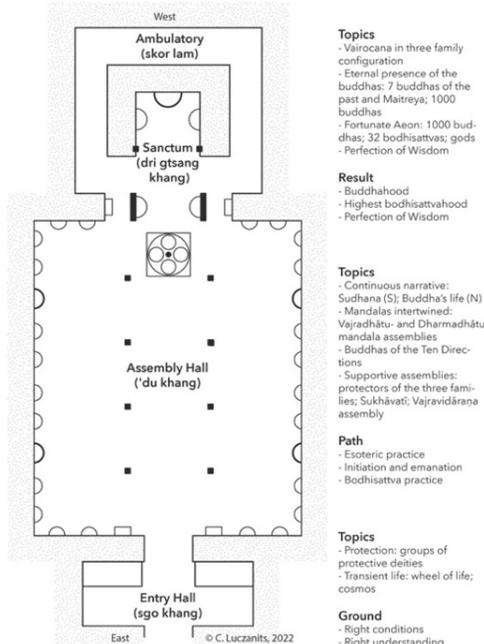
Buddhism arrived in the Himalayan areas in many different forms. In fact, numerous strands of esoteric Buddhism, most commonly classified in four categories of tantra, competed with older traditions, native beliefs, and some form of Bon religion. It was

Yeshe Wo who promoted the use of esoteric Buddhism—in particular, in the form of the more conservative Yogatantra, as a means of state formation across the newly established Purang-Guge Kingdom. The Tabo Main Temple must have constituted an integral part of this effort, complementing the major foundations of Toling (Guge), Khorchak (Purang), and Nyarma (Ladakh).²

Historical sources convey the selective approach of the western Tibetan royal house to Buddhism and religion more broadly. In particular, unorganized village Tantrism and Bon were persecuted. The sources also make clear that the Indian derivation of Buddhist teachings was valued, and that the secrecy of the more controversial highest Yogatantra teachings was adhered to.³ What this meant for the public presentation of Buddhism can best be gathered from the Tabo Main Temple.

ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM

All three structural units of the main temple at Tabo—a small entry hall, a spacious assembly hall, and a large sanctum surrounded by an ambulatory—date to the foundation of the monument in the late tenth century, but most of the decoration dates to the renovation finished in 1042 (fig. 2).



- Topics**
- Vairocana in three family configuration
 - Eternal presence of the buddhas: 7 buddhas of the past and Maitreya; 1000 buddhas
 - Fortunate Aeon: 1000 buddhas; 32 bodhisattvas; gods
 - Perfection of Wisdom
- Result**
- Buddhahood
 - Highest bodhisattvahood
 - Perfection of Wisdom
- Topics**
- Continuous narrative: Sudhana (S); Buddha's life (N)
 - Mandalas intertwined: Vajradhātu- and Dharmadhātu mandala assemblies
 - Buddhas of the Ten Directions
 - Supportive assemblies: protectors of the three families; Sukhāvati; Vajravidāra assembly
- Path**
- Esoteric practice
 - Initiation and emanation
 - Bodhisattva practice
- Topics**
- Protection: groups of protective deities
 - Transient life: wheel of life; cosmos
- Ground**
- Right conditions
 - Right understanding



Fig. 2 Plan of the Tabo Main Temple, Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India, with a listing of its iconographic program after the renovation was completed in 1042; drawing by C. Luczanits, 2021

Fig. 3 Protective Deities and a Donor Assembly; Tabo Main Temple, south wall of the entry hall; Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India; 996; photograph by C. Luczanits, 1991, WHAV

The entry hall preserves most of the foundation period decoration—a wide range of the protective deities, fragments of the wheel of life and the cosmos, as well as a donor depiction headed by Yeshe Wo and his two sons (fig. 3). As this last image retains the names of all the prominent monks, we can be sure that the famous translator Rinchen Zangpo was not directly involved in the foundation. Instead, Dulwa Jangchub, shown among the top row of monks in the entry hall and, as abbot of the monastery, above the renovation inscription (fig. 4) has a central position. That the entry hall was not renovated indicates that its program did not need to be updated.



Fig. 4 Donor Assembly above the Renovation Inscription; Tabo Main Temple, ambulatory; Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India; 1042; photograph by C. Luczanits, 1994, WHAV



Fig. 5 Monks performing a ritual in the assembly hall of the Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India, surrounded by the clay sculptures of the Vajradhatu mandala; photograph by C. Luczanits, 2005

The assembly hall is dominated by the thirty-three life-size sculptures of the Vajradhatu mandala, which forms the dynamic center of the iconographic program of this room (fig. 5). Two narratives are painted underneath them. On the south side, the narrative of Sudhana's pilgrimage to different teachers according to the Gandavyuha Sutra culminates in Sudhana's assimilation of Samantabhadra in the presence of Vairochana (fig. 5) and all the buddhas. Thereby Vairochana is Buddha Shakyamuni's glorified aspect, and he is also the main buddha of the Vajradhatu mandala. This ascending movement is counterbalanced by the descending movement of Vairochana displaying the Buddha's life on the north side of the assembly hall. The multiplicity of buddhas across space is manifest in the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, occupying the top level on the south and north walls.

Recent research has further revealed that most of the sculptures are part of a second mandala assembly, the assembly of the Dharmadhatu mandala, which takes up much of the remaining space above the sculptures.⁴ The main deities of this assembly are represented in the northwestern corner of the assembly hall, while the rest of the deities

are spread across the room in a distribution that builds on that of the Vajradhatu mandala (fig. 6). This mandala introduces the notion of the Buddha's consorts into the Yogatantra corpus, and more broadly presents a comprehensive system that integrates Mahayana concepts, such as the ten stages of a bodhisattva's career, into a tantric environment, as does the assembly hall program in its entirety.



Fig. 6 Plan of the Dharmadhatu mandala assembly in the assembly hall of Tabo Main Temple, Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India, the colors signifying the Buddha family attribution of the respective deity; drawing by C. Luczanits, 2021

The presence of two intertwined mandala assemblies in the assembly hall also explains the doubling of the Sixteen Bodhisattvas of the Fortunate Aeon (*bhadrakalpa*) in the ambulatory (fig. 7) surrounding the sanctum or cella. Even though their iconography is not yet fully understood, the upper bodhisattvas can be interpreted as complementing the Dharmadhatu mandala assembly, while the lower ones complement the Vajradhatu mandala assembly. Their presence supplements the thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon that, together with the group of eight Buddhas of Past and Future, occupy the remaining space of the ambulatory (fig 7). Thus, while the assembly hall emphasizes the spatial spread of the buddhas, the ambulatory focuses on the temporal spread from the past into the future. Underneath the buddhas and bodhisattvas is a third narrative, Sadaprarudita's search for the Perfection of Wisdom, the symbolic mother of all buddhas.

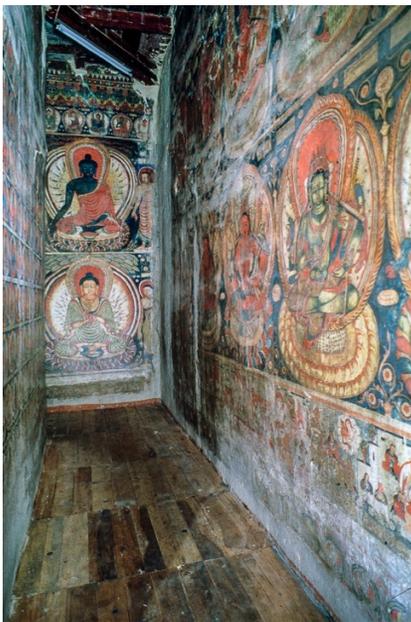


Fig. 7 Ambulatory of Tabo Main Temple, Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India, showing the two rows of bodhisattvas on the right, the last two of the eight Buddhas of the past and future in the back, and the Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon on the left; ca. 1040; photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 2001, WHAV



Fig. 8 Meditating Vairochana (today painted red) flanked by Avalokitesvara and Vajrasattva; Tabo Main Temple, cella; Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India; 996 with later alterations; photograph by Jaroslav Poncar, 1984

The main sculpture in the sanctum is again Vairochana, who presides over a bodhisattva and goddesses retinue looked over by further buddhas (fig. 8). The flanking bodhisattvas are Avalokiteshvara on the left and Vajrasattva on the right, who together with the central buddha form a three-family configuration that symbolically counters the three poisons that keep sentient beings in the cycle of existence (samsara).

GODDESS DHARMAMEGHABHUMI

The goddess Dharmameghabhumi (Dharma Cloud Stage) (fig. 1), part of the Dharmadhatu mandala assembly, represents one of the stages (*bhumi*) of a bodhisattva's career. As one of the personifications of these stages occupying the eastern quarter of the middle palace of the mandala, the goddess is found between the sculptures representing the eastern assembly (fig. 9). Her main attribute, the vajra, signifies her affiliation with the eastern family of Buddha Akshobhya, which has the vajra as its symbol. Her identifying attribute is a book surrounded by a cloud, the book representing Buddhist teaching (dharma).

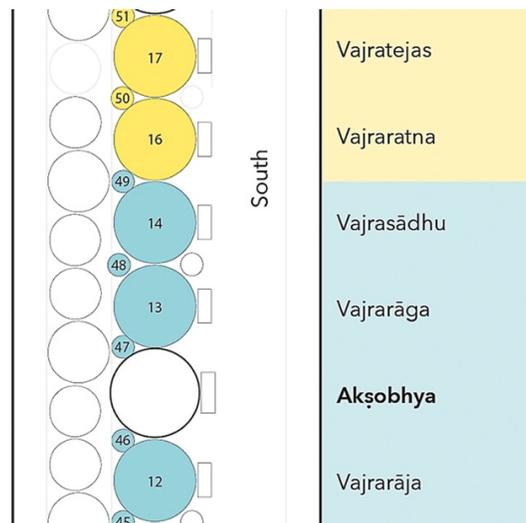


Fig. 9. Goddess Dharmameghabhumi is found at number 48 in this detail of plan of the Dharmadhatu mandala assembly in the assembly hall of Tabo Main Temple, Tabo Monastery, Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India, the colors signifying the Buddha family attribution of the respective deity; drawing by C. Luczanits, 2021

The stages of a bodhisattva's progression toward awakening constitute a primary Mahayana concept. Usually, ten such stages are enumerated, with the ultimate leading to the awakening of the bodhisattva. The goddess Dharmameghabhumi, however, represents the penultimate stage in a twelvefold system that is unique to the Dharmadhatu mandala. Symbolically, she stands for the realization of the all-pervading nature of the Buddha's teachings, including the esoteric ones.

The painting of the goddess also exemplifies the highest-quality murals of the temple's decoration, employing an artistic style that is commonly associated with Kashmir. Most of the renovation-period murals, including the much larger bodhisattvas in the ambulatory, display this sophisticated style, with round features, soft outlines, and fine shading in particular colors. As these were also executed in the highest-quality materials, they have remained largely unaltered since their creation in the mid-eleventh century.

BUDDHIST PATH

Overall, the sophistication of the Tabo Main Temple is stunning. The identification of the full Dharmadhatu mandala assembly has made clear that the temple must be read as an integrated whole across the three spatial units. While the core of the two mandala assemblies is in the assembly hall, the pan-Indian protective deities in the entry hall represent their outer perimeter. On the other side of the temple, the Bodhisattvas of the Fortunate Aeon stretch the assembly into the ambulatory. This complex program supersedes the three-family configuration seen in the sculptures of the foundation period in the sanctum and two protectors in the entry hall.

Given the increasing sanctity of the three spatial units, the temple itself can also be read as a representation of the Buddhist path (fig. 2). In this reading, the entry hall designates the ground for Buddhist practice, the correct understanding of the nature of

the samsara, and the conditions required to eventually overcome it. The assembly hall presents the actual path, the diverse practices of a bodhisattva, and the initiation into the esoteric Buddhist practice in the presence of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, as well as its implementation. Finally, the sanctum and its ambulatory stand for the result, the attainment of the Perfection of Wisdom, the presence of the buddhas and Buddhahood itself.

WIDER RELEVANCE

The multivalent decoration of the Tabo Main Temple may appear exceptional, but it is typical of Tibetan Buddhist art and architecture. As Tabo demonstrates, by the time of the so-called Later Diffusion of Buddhism in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, a broad range of Buddhist sources had already been translated and systematized. The temple constitutes an instance in this process, fusing a broad Mahayana base with esoteric Buddhist teachings, whose ultimate forms were only hinted at through the Dharmadhatu mandala. This cautiousness is a direct result of the conservative attitude of the temple's founders toward esoteric Buddhism.

The conservative nature of the iconographic program of the Tabo Main Temple is also indicated by the fact that the stupa of Borobudur in Java, which is thought to have been built between the late eighth and mid-ninth centuries, already used the same principal sources for its decoration. However, the decoration in Borobudur utilized these sources in a different manner and placed less emphasis on esoteric Buddhist practice. With the Dharmadhatu mandala superseding the Vajradhatu mandala, the program of the Tabo Main Temple goes far beyond that of Borobudur.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Foundational works on the Tabo Main Temple are Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, ed., *Tabo: A Lamp for the Kingdom: Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalaya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997) and Luciano Petech and Christian Luczanits, eds., *Inscriptions from the Tabo Main Temple: Texts and Translations* (Rome: Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 1999). Theoretically, the temple could also have been renovated twelve years earlier or later, but the dates provided here fit best with other historical information.

² On the state support of organized Buddhism, see Christian Jahoda and Christiane Kalantari, “Kingship in Western Tibet in the 10th and 11th Centuries,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 24 (2015): 77–103.

³ The most important primary sources in this regard are two ordinances issued by members of the ruling house; see Samten G. Karmay, “An Open Letter by Pho-Brang Zhi-Ba-’od,” in *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, revised (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2009), 17–40; Samten G. Karmay, “The Ordinance of LHa Bla-Ma Ye-Shes-’od,” in *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, revised (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2009), 3–16.

⁴ Christian Forthcoming Luczanits, “Mandalas Intertwined—Why Minor Goddesses in the Tabo Main Temple Matter,” Forthcoming. While the core deities of the Dharmadhatu mandala had been recognized earlier, its full representation and integration into the entire iconographic program of the temple has only been established with this forthcoming article.

FURTHER READING

Klimburg-Salter, Deborah E. 1997. *Tabo: A Lamp for the Kingdom: Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalaya*. Milan: Skira; New York: Thames and Hudson.

Petech, Luciano, and Christian Luczanits, eds. 1999. *Inscriptions from the Tabo Main Temple: Texts and Translations*. Rome: Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente.

Luczanits, Christian. n.d. “Tabo Main Temple.” Accessed December 7, 2022.

<http://www.luczanits.net/sites/Tabo/MainTemple.html>.

CITATION

Christian Luczanits, “Goddess Dharmameghabhumī in the Tabo Main Temple: The Iconographic Program of a Mid-Eleventh Century Monument,” *Project Himalayan Art, Rubin Museum of Art*, 2023,

<http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/goddess-dharmameghabhumī-in-the-tabo-main-temple>.

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